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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: REDSHIRTS TARGET PUBLIC HEALTH MINISTER, REGIONAL POLICE
COMMISSIONER AND PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

REF: CHIANG MAI 59 (COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS) AND PREVIOUS

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) In their latest wave of protests July 6 and 9, redshirts in northern Thailand confronted Public Health Minister Wittaya Kaewparadai, the Chiang Mai Regional Police Commissioner and the seat of the Provincial Government. The Minister is the latest in a string of visitors supportive of the current governing coalition to be singled out, though, in contrast to previous ones, this round of protests was peaceful. The police were targeted out of what turned out to be unsubstantiated fear on the part of the redshirts that the bail granted to some of their local leaders in the wake of their actions to support the April riots in Bangkok would be revoked.

2. (SBU) Comment: Though the number of redshirt supporters willing to participate in such rallies in the north appears to be on the decline, community radio remains an effective tool for these groups to organize such gatherings, despite agreement between the Vice Governor, pro-redshirt and pro-yellowshirt radio stations (Ref A) not to engage in political activity. If the RTG wants to curb this sort of redshirt activity, it will have to take serious steps to enact and enforce restrictions on community radio programming, in conjunction with continued robust law enforcement efforts. Nonetheless, the decision by local redshirt leaders to discontinue the July 9 protest after speaking directly to senior regional and provincial officials demonstrates that even when political tensions are high, violence can be avoided. End Summary and Comment.

Health Minister Kaewparadai Under Siege

3. (U) According to Consulate contacts, approximately 200 redshirt supporters gathered in front of a government-run hospital in Chiang Mai on the evening of Monday, July 6 to protest the visit of Public Health Minister Wittaya Kaewparadai, who was due to kick off an H1N1 awareness campaign with a speech and by handing out masks to attendees. On short notice, Rak Chiang Mai 51 (RCM51 - the largest redshirt group in Chiang Mai) used its community radio station to call supporters to the hospital. Due to the limited time they had to prepare, many protestors arrived without the customary redshirts and red caps they usually sport. Contrary to press reports, our contacts told us that only 200 redshirt supporters turned up - not the 500 some publications cited.

4. (U) As the Minister was launching the campaign, the redshirt

supporters broke through police and security cordons and entered the hospital. Minister Wittaya was therefore unable to carry on with the event, departing rapidly under police escort after delivering his opening remarks. Upon learning that the Minister had departed, the protestors disbanded peacefully. In contrast to previous similar protests that turned violent, there were no injuries and no damage to hospital property.

Targeting Police and Provincial Government Out of Fear?

15. Redshirts followed up on their July 6 rally by calling on supporters throughout northern Thailand via community radio on July 8 to rally at RCM51's headquarters on July 9. They organized this gathering in response to comments reported in the press by Chiang Mai Vice Governor for Security Affairs Pairot Saengpoowong in which he allegedly said that bail for three RCM51 leaders granted in the wake of their actions to support the redshirts April riots in Bangkok should be revoked. About 400 supporters from some northern and central provinces participated.

16. (U) At around noon on July 9, the group marched from RCM51 headquarters to Region 5 Police Headquarters to protest what seemed to be the imminent revocation of the bail previously granted to three RCM51 leaders. While at the police headquarters, several leaders met with the Police Commissioner, who assured them that there was no move afoot to revoke their bail. The group then proceeded to the Provincial Hall and demanded a meeting with Vice Governor Pairot, which was hastily arranged.

17. (SBU) According to Vice Governor Pairot, he told the redshirt leaders that his comments had been misinterpreted.

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What he meant, he said, was that if individuals out on bail continued their political activities, the authorities would have to consider whether that bail should be revoked. Pairot told us he clearly conveyed to RCM51 leader Phetchawat Wattanapongsirikul that any further political activity would result in the revocation of his bail. He also suggested to Phetchawat that if RCM51 wanted to continue activities like the July 6 rally, leaders other than himself and his two colleagues who were granted bail in April needed to take charge.

18. (SBU) Pairot told us on July 10 that he believes RCM51 leaders clearly understood the implications, and that Phetchawat appeared afraid of additional legal action against him. (Note: The director of the hospital at which the redshirts rallied on July 6 had been preparing to press trespassing and disturbing the peace charges.) We will continue to monitor the situation.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
ANDERSON